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THE NEGRO AS A MECHANIC.

BY THE HON. ROBERT LOWRY, EX-GOVERNOR OF MISSISSIPPI.

CAN the negro be trained as a mechanic, or is he by nature adapted to other work than that of an unskilled laborer? The question may confidently be answered in the affirmative. While this answer cannot be successfully controverted, and while it may have a material bearing on the prosperity of the Southern States, yet it involves grave questions, the successful solution of which would tend to a better understanding of the two sections of this great nation. The negro was held in bondage in all the colonies save one, before the adoption of the Federal Constitution, and whether or not he was the prime cause of the greatest war of modern times, it is unquestionably true that he regards his liberation as the result of that struggle.

Prior to the war there were a large number of negro mechanics in the Southern States; many of them were expert blacksmiths, wheelwrights, wagon-makers, brick-masons, carpenters, plasterers, painters, and shoemakers. They became masters of their respective trades by reason of sufficiently long service under the control and direction of expert white mechanics. During the existence of slavery the contract for qualifying the negro as a mechanic was made between his owner and the master workman.

Now the negro being, in his own words, a "freed man," will not consent to restraints. He cannot divest himself of the idea that apprenticeship in its most modified form is a species of slavery for a term of years. He may be assured of the relation of master and apprentice as it exists in almost every civilized country; still he is slow to embrace it. He appreciates the advantages of superior skill, yet his teachings of liberty are to his mind inconsistent with the exercise of absolute and continued authority over him.

Many persons in Mississippi and Louisiana remember a firm extensively engaged as contractors and builders of bridges and houses before the war, who owned their entire force of negro mechanics. These gentlemen were natives of Pennsylvania, but neither their education nor their early prejudices against the system of African slavery as it then existed in the Southern States of the Union were strong enough to prevent them from purchasing intelligent young negroes and teaching them to become expert mechanics. Some of these negroes became excellent carpenters, others were trained to be brick-masons and plasterers, and a few of them were taught to be expert iron-workers. This firm built a large number of bridges which spanned various streams in Mississippi, and hundreds of spacious residences and public buildings.

It has never been an unusual sight to see white and negro mechanics working in the same shop or on the same building in any of the Southern States. In the days of slavery it never caused the slightest friction for the two races to be engaged in work together. There never was, and there is not to-day, in any portion of the great and growing South, the slightest objection on the part of the white people to the employment of negro mechanics who are at all capable of performing what is required of them. On the contrary, the men of the South, knowing the good qualities and the docility of the negroes, never withhold employment from them unless it be on large contracts to which the negro mechanics are financially unequal.

Since the war the young negro men have been allured by schemers, white and black alike, into politics, which they have come to believe is the chief end of existence. It is natural for the negro to be a subject of anxious solicitude on the part of those who contributed to his emancipation, as well as those who formerly owned him, and among whom he now lives and will continue to live. In this connection I am constrained to believe that a failure on the part of each section to properly appreciate the aims and objects of the other creates differences and contentions in relation to the condition, needs and welfare of the negro.

With advanced thought and unequalled civilization it is doubtful whether American leadership reaches that high standard erected a half century ago by the great commoner of Kentucky.

In the words of one who pronounced a eulogy on the life and services of Mr. Clay, which deserves a place among the best productions in the English language, appears the following :

“There was nothing sectional in his policy. His broad and comprehensive genius held in its vision the interests of the whole nation, and his big American heart throbbed for it all. He was intensely American in all his thoughts and all his feelings. To cherish the interests and the glory and to build up the power of his country, and his whole country, was the aim of all his policy and the passion of his life. He knew perfectly the relation which each part of the country bore to the other, and he understood profoundly the character, genius and wants of the American people.”

Such leadership to-day, from whatever quarter, divested as it would be of fanaticism and mistaken philanthropy, would be a blessing to this great country.

The recent enfranchisement of the negroes leads them to look with deep-rooted aversion and hostility to entering into an indenture as an apprentice for two or more years, even for the acquirement of proficiency as a first-rate mechanic. They have an idea that they are abridging their own liberty, as indeed they do during the term of their indenture, forgetting that, while thus restricting their freedom of action for a few years, they are acquiring a familiarity with a mechanical trade which may be, and often is, of priceless value. There is but little difficulty in training an intelligent negro to be a mechanic. In all the cities and towns in the South he is to be found engaged in such employment, and his proficiency is only retarded by impediments and obstructions which, through the influence of others, he makes for himself. If the negro without education or mental training could make a reasonably good mechanic, it follows that education would largely increase his skill as a workman.

The people of Mississippi, and, so far as I am advised, of all the Gulf States, have assumed the obligation of affording the children of both races and sexes the most ample facilities for obtaining a common-school education free of charge. In addition to the revenue raised in Mississippi for the purpose mentioned, the State has for years contributed, and is now contributing, in part to the support of an institution for colored boys and girls, in which an industrial superintendent has been added to the corps of instructors. The industrial department of this institution embraces the making of wagons, carpenter work, blacksmith and tin shops, besides other industries, all of which are success-

fully conducted by the students, under the supervision of the industrial teacher.

The negro is an intensely imitative and excitable creature. When under the influence of excitement he is subject to the greatest excesses. Free from excitement, his capacity for labor, under proper control, is and can be profitably utilized.

The American who is reasonably informed of his country's history will not fail to remember that party spirit was regarded by Washington as the bane of our institutions ; and this becomes doubly intensified by sectional animosities in which the negro, through others, has come to be an important factor. The imitative quality in negroes of both sexes is constantly observed in every-day life in the South ; not only is it observable in the negro man, but it is equally marked in the more intelligent colored woman. She adopts with facility the styles and fashions of the leading ladies of society. Not only so, but some colored women become expert mantua-makers, and cut, fit, and make expensive gowns for white ladies of wealth.

Another reason why the negroes of the South are averse to being taught mechanical trades is to be found in what they understand to be the hostility of the white mechanics of the North against the negro mechanic. They assert as their information, and insist that it is true, that young negroes are not allowed to learn a mechanical trade in any city or town in the North or West. As white mechanics are nomadic in their habits and wander from State to State, city to city, and town to town, so the negro of any age or sex is more of a nomad than his pale-faced brother ; yet his fixed opinion seems to be that in the pursuit of his trade he cannot venture beyond the confines of his own State or the neighboring Southern States with any certainty of remunerative employment based upon proficiency. Therefore, objecting to the restraints imposed in learning a trade at home, alleging that it borders upon a species of slavery, and assuming that because of the color of his skin he would be debarred from an even chance as a "bread-winner" among white mechanics of the North, he floats on the sluggish tide of indolence and idleness, with not much care of what a day may bring forth.

That the more intelligent negro has abundant capacity to become a reasonably good mechanic there can be no question ; but his crude ideas of freedom, his want of appreciation of citizen-

ship, the cheap diet upon which he subsists, the genial climate that requires but a humble shelter, and the heretofore annual excitement attending political elections, all tend to divert his mind from any fixed object or occupation. He will not become proficient in the mechanical field, even with the rudiments of education, until he can divest himself of false traditions and prejudices pertaining to his future exemption from slavery, and thoroughly understands that it requires time and close service to master the trade of the mechanic. The great mass of negroes are engaged in agriculture, and these are more contented than those who follow other pursuits; but all need protection from the constant political strife to which they have been subjected.

The constitution of Mississippi has fixed the tenure of State and county offices at four years, and from and after 1895 elections other than Congressional will recur only every fourth year. This change in the fundamental law, it is believed, will add to the peace and quietude of the State. It is difficult to understand by any process of reasoning why sectional animosities caused by slavery should be kept alive a quarter of a century after the institution had been abolished. True it is that the white and black races are separated by a gulf that cannot be spanned; but the fair inference of the civilized world was that broad statesmanship would so adjust the relations between the races as to develop the greatest amount of good in the former slave, and, if possible, lead him to a higher plane of civilization. All should generously unite in contributing to his mental elevation and moral training, and thus fit him for greater efficiency in agricultural pursuits, and afford those who seek skilled labor an opportunity of entering that field.

Although slavery existed prior to the adoption of the Federal Constitution, and at that time and for many years thereafter was considered an unavoidable evil, yet the institution, coupled with other causes, cost the Government hundreds of thousands of valuable lives and billions of money. The negro was not only guiltless as to the differences that precipitated the war, but was not a participant to any appreciable extent. He remained loyal to his owner during the protracted struggle. Liberated in poverty and ignorance, he appealed to all parties and all fair-minded men for protection against improper manipulations, and for direction in the channels of industry to which he is adapted.

It should be understood that, in dealing with great questions affecting directly or remotely the people of the whole country, material differences exist between statesmen of high rank, and in the submission of policies for adoption the masses who are less versed in governmental matters, but who bear the burdens, pass upon and determine the issues.

It is gratefully understood, too, that philanthropists like Mr. Peabody, Mr. Corcoran, Mr. Slater, and others, whose memories are cherished by the American people and whose great hearts embraced mankind, devoted the accumulations of a lifetime to charitable and benevolent purposes ; but it is difficult to comprehend why, in a government of the largest liberty under the sun, there should be such great diversity of views in reference to the training and civilization of a race of people known to be vastly inferior either to the Anglo-Saxon or Latin race. A quarter of a century has passed since the freedom of the negro was proclaimed ; yet American statesmanship seems not to have been equal to the solution of the great problem of his mental, moral, and physical elevation.

Another obstacle that suggests itself to converting colored youths into skilled workmen lies in the hostility of the various mechanical trades to allowing more than an infinitesimal percentage of apprentices, even of the white race. This mistaken policy has its growth in the perpetual fear of home competition, while the doors are left wide open to an innumerable swarm of skilled workmen from other lands.

With the removal of the obstacles to which reference has already been made, there can be no question that the more intelligent young negroes in the Southern States can readily acquire in the various mechanical trades the skill necessary to make them expert workmen, as carpenters, cabinet-makers, blacksmiths, shoemakers, tailors, painters, tanners, paper-hangers, upholsterers and plasterers. The removal of these obstacles, and the accomplishment of the purpose aimed at will undeniably redound to the benefit of both races, and will certainly elevate the negro, and promote his happiness, prosperity, and self-respect in a very remarkable degree.

ROBERT LOWRY.